



# Oxford Alloys firmly in growth

People involved in welding CRAs are probably quite familiar with the name Oxford Alloys. Since its foundation in 1970, the company has developed a solid reputation as a long-term, reliable source for quality welding products. In most cases, a single phone call is all it takes to ensure next-day delivery of the required welding rods or wire, even those which may be 'exotic'. Sadly, this convenience means very few people have cause to actually visit Oxford Alloys and meet the team of professionals who make this possible. Stainless Steel World therefore decided it was high time to meet with CEO Mr Mark Ashworth at Oxford Alloys' corporate headquarters in Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

*By Thijs Elshof and David Sear*

'Mighty oaks from little acorns grow,' is an old English idiom but one which constantly springs to mind as I tour the premises of Oxford Alloys in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Since being founded as a regional distributor of welding supplies in 1970, the company has gone on to develop a national and then a global presence as a master distributor for corrosion resistant welding alloys.

This proudly-independent company was created by Owen Ashworth, who foresaw the rise of corrosion resistant alloys and the attendant need for welding

consumables. In the early 1980's Oxford Alloys grew to become a master distributor selling products throughout the USA. Its emphasis on maintaining a large inventory of nickel base welding wire and electrodes and same day shipping service was a key driver for this growth. In the mid 1990's Oxford Alloys decided the time was right to export and sell corrosion resistant welding products on a worldwide basis. At the end of the millennium, the company went one step further and – in close partnership with the mills – developed its own brand of welding wire. The result has been a huge

success with rapidly growing sales, and today the company has approvals from end users world-wide for its products, notably welding consumables for stainless steel, nickel alloys, duplex, super duplex and titanium.

Mark Ashworth, who took over the reins as CEO from his father in 2002, comments: "customers appreciate the high quality and consistency that the Oxford Alloys brand represents. Of course there are mills that can produce welding consumables for titanium or duplex or nickel-alloys, but no one mill produces them all. Our business



model has been to partner with the highest quality mills and then create a broad range of quality products under one roof. So all grades, forms, and diameters are available from a convenient single source of supply for customers."

As I saw during my trip around the spacious warehouse, Oxford Alloys maintains extensive stocks that would not be found on other distributors' shelves. Mr Ashworth explains more: "let's pick a box at random – here we have Alloy 82 045 Mig wire. Now, a regular distributor would typically only want to procure such a product when a specific requirement arises. The mills can't help out as their lead times are measured in weeks and moreover the minimum purchase volumes would be excessive. As you can see, we have some 6000 lbs of Alloy 82 045 MIG wire in stock. It is ready for shipment today, whether the customer needs one spool or 5000 lbs. That is where we add significant value to the supply chain."

#### Customer-centric

For a company to become one of the largest master distributors of duplex, super duplex and nickel base welding alloys in North America then it must be doing something right. Listen to the people at Oxford Alloys and it soon becomes clear what that 'something' is. In all business areas – from warehousing to quality assurance and from sales to management

– they are always focusing on the customer.

Mr Ashworth: "Oxford Alloys' entire organization operates within a customer centric culture. So issues that may seem like special requests to most suppliers are simply routine for us." Giving some examples, he notes fast response times, same-day shipments, special packaging or labeling and finally turn-key logistics coordination and document preparation.

Mr Ashworth: "we have invested significantly in IT systems, which link together all our processes. So as soon as we receive a product inquiry we can inform the client about item availability by return. Once the order has been confirmed a pick ticket will be printed out at the appropriate warehouse and the items made ready for shipment the same day. That is all possible thanks to our extensive inventory. This is a real service to local distributors, as it saves them the expense of maintaining their own stocks of exotic welding consumables. The rapid response is really appreciated by parties further down the supply chain, as speed is often critical if equipment is to be produced on time."

Of course, every company needs to turn a profit in order to survive, but at Oxford Alloys the sales and customer service groups avoid the 'transactional' focus and instead prefer the 'relationship' focus. Says Mr Ashworth: "our goal and commitment is

# mode



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*During inspection, top quality testing instruments are used to assure the proper alloy chemistry of each and every heat of material received.*

to support our USA and worldwide distributor network by partnering and assisting them in achieving long-term success and sales within their respective markets. This supply chain partnership is at the heart of our business model. Our National Sales team and Export Sales Director John Robinson are constantly traveling, supporting our customer's needs and requirements on a personal basis. They also provide valuable data on future demand for alloys, so we can adjust our own stock levels accordingly. Moreover, since his retirement my father also continues to travel extensively abroad, meeting customers. With forty years' experience, he is the perfect 'goodwill ambassador' for Oxford Alloys.

### Quality assurance

Today, just about every company will have quality control procedures in place. Few, however, will be able to match Oxford Alloys total commitment to quality at all stages. ISO 9001-2000 certified by TUV,

the company has a team of dedicated quality assurance personnel who perform value added functions at all stages, such as receiving, inspection, warehousing and shipping. In addition, Oxford Alloys routinely conducts audits of its partner production mills as part of its extensive quality assurance program. Says Mr Ashworth: "we demand consistent quality far beyond simply meeting AWS and ASME specifications from our partner mills and we make sure they adhere to our additional standards of quality."

If this were not enough, the company has also made significant dollar investments in precision laboratory-quality analytical testing instruments. This is used to assure the proper alloy chemistry of each and every heat of material received during the inspection process. And last but by no means least, Oxford Alloys goes out of its way to properly store data as a pre-requisite for materials traceability. Notes Mr Ashworth: "Traceability is at the backbone of our quality assurance program. Via an

internal coding system we can back-track right to the mill production. To give a concrete example: a customer might have a box of our product that they purchased ten or even twenty years ago. All we need is the information on the product label and we can immediately trace the material to the exact mill production and corresponding alloy chemistry verification report. This may not sound that important, but customers tell me how much they value this service. Reworks and changes during fabrication are very costly, so our ability to provide consistent, high-quality products is greatly valued."

### Oxford Online

Oxford Alloys' proven commitment to quality has won the company approvals from many of the world's leading oil, gas and chemicals companies, who are the ultimate 'users' of its products. These 'seals of approval' have really paid dividends, as Oxford Alloys' has enjoyed strong growth during the past decade. In the domestic arena, this growth has been supported by the opening of full stocking distribution centers in Houston, Texas and Indianapolis, Indiana to compliment the corporate sales and service center in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. "The Houston facility is ideally located to service the important oil and gas industry, whilst Indianapolis is a key hub for sales and service to the entire Eastern seaboard," explains Mr Ashworth.

Oxford Alloys has appointed dedicated resources and key personnel to its important export functions. Mr Ashworth: "We now supply our products on a worldwide basis and are a recent recipient of the prestigious U.S. President's "E" Award in recognition of our outstanding export sales achievement and expansion. Furthermore, in 2008 we were also named by Inc. Magazine as one of the fastest growing private companies in America." Mr Ashworth is confident that this growth will continue both nationally and internationally. He points out that Oxford Alloys will continue to add complementary product lines, will invest in new technology that helps customers conduct smoother business transactions and will continue to add key distributor relationships in important markets both in the US and abroad. "There are plenty of areas with a lot of potential for us, so we will definitely build on past successes," he notes. Whilst discussing new technology, Mr Ashworth proudly brings up 'Oxford Online'. This web-based system empowers customers as it provides real-

time access to important account and shipping information. Each time an order is shipped the customer receives an automatic email notifying him of the shipment and providing a link to the certified material test reports, shipping information, and other pertinent information. Says Mr Ashworth: "this tool is especially valuable for our international customers where timely access to documentation is so critical. We will continue to enhance 'Oxford Online' and add features that enhance seamless and effortless business transactions. The objective is to make customers lives easier, so they can focus on the important revenue generating aspects of their business."

### Special

At the end of my visit, Mr Ashworth reiterated that Oxford Alloys' goal is to create the perfect blend of key attributes. These include customer service, a large inventory ready for immediate shipment, additional value in quality assurance and lastly competitive prices. "We want to blend all these benefits together to add value in the supply chain. That has always been our catalyst for growth," he explains, adding that as a private company Oxford Alloys is ideally set up to respond quickly to challenges and opportunities. He concludes: "what really makes Oxford Alloys special is the unique culture of pride and the customer-centric focus that permeates throughout our entire organization. At all levels our team understands and operates under the umbrella of belief that if we put our customers in a position to succeed, we too will succeed."

### Supporting new generations of alloys

Oxford Alloys is committed to providing welding consumables that match the requirements of the latest generation of materials. Recently, for example, it launched a super duplex 2594 welding consumable for GMAW, GTAW, and SMAW. Says Mr Ashworth: "It is important to stay abreast of alloy formulations and for that reason we maintain close links with the mills as well as leading associations such as the American Welding Society. As new alloys come onto the market, we will stock an appropriate filler metal in order to pre-empt requests from our customers."



*The entire organization at Oxford Alloys— from warehousing to quality assurance and from sales to management - operates within a customer centric culture.*



*Oxford Alloys ability to ship out orders the same day is a cornerstone of the company's success.*

### Facts & Figures

<b>Name</b>	Oxford Alloys
<b>Business model</b>	Master distributor of corrosion resistant and heat resistant welding consumables
<b>Headquarters</b>	Baton Rouge, Louisiana
<b>Own distribution centres</b>	Baton Rouge, Louisiana; Houston, Texas; Indianapolis, Indiana.
<b>Distribution network</b>	Over fifty countries worldwide
<b>Products</b>	Welding wire & electrodes (high temperature nickel alloys, titanium alloys, duplex and super duplex stainless steels).
<b>Product forms</b>	GMAW, GTAW, SMAW, SAW, and FCAW
<b>Key markets</b>	Oil & gas, chemical & petrochemical processes, power generation, marine, desalination, pollution control